Name _____ Date _____ Class _____

Fostering Self-Esteem During Difficult Times

Psychologists define self-esteem as confidence in one's ability to face life's problems, to meet personal needs and desires, and to be happy. Children who are successful at home, school, and play tend to have high self-esteem.

One of the most important times that parents and teachers have to influence a child's self-esteem is when the child has to deal with a setback. Some parents and caregivers try to protect the child by denying that something bad has happened, or that the child made a mistake. Minimizing the event does not change the obvious disappointment of a child who was not invited to her neighbor's birthday party or who is looking at the collapsed jumble of craft sticks and glue that was intended to be a house.

It is important to remember that shielding children from unpleasant truths keeps them from learning to cope with problems, an essential life skill. In fact, it may make them feel that problems are too big for them to solve. People with low self-esteem feel helpless, indecisive, hopeless, and unable to cope. Denying the truth does not build confidence.

Adults need to help children learn *how* to deal with problems themselves so they will become confident in their own abilities. That self-confidence will result in higher self-esteem. Here are some important steps for helping children cope with setbacks:

- **Show respect for children's feelings.** Give them time to get over their disappointment, anger, or hurt and to regain self-control. Comfort them in the most appropriate way, but do not just try to "cheer" them out of unhappiness. That implies that they are sad for no reason.

- **Show respect for children's intelligence.** Do not give empty compliments about their abilities or tell them they did something well when they did not. This confuses younger children and makes older ones question the adult's honesty and judgment. Be empathetic and point out that their reaction to disappointment is perfectly normal. Remind them that one setback, or even a series of setbacks, does not mean that they cannot overcome a problem or master a task.

- **Help children analyze the problem.** Talk about what went wrong and why. Allow children to find the reasons for themselves, using questions to prompt them to think of reasons they may have overlooked. Let children take responsibility for their own mistakes, but do not accuse them. Discuss the consequences of what happened.

- **Help the children solve the problem for themselves.** Brainstorm different solutions together. Let as many suggestions as possible come from the child. Then discuss how each solution would be carried out and what the probable outcome would be. Finally, compare the various solutions to decide which one is best.

- **Foster an optimistic attitude.** Point out past successes and how they were accomplished by the child's hard work and perseverance. Encourage the attitude that mistakes and setbacks are opportunities to learn something new, or to better understand something that they already know.

- **Show confidence in children.** Tell them you believe in them. Prove it by allowing them to take on other responsibilities. When the occasion

arises, comment on how the child's performance of a task has improved, even singing all the words of a song. The key is to show that you have noticed a child's increasing abilities.

- **Avoid praise for things outside of the child's control.** Having pretty hair or being tall are not things a child has achieved. Brushing his or her own hair is.

Taking Action

Imagine that you are working at a preschool or kindergarten where one of the children had an upsetting setback with a project or playmate. Describe the problem and explain what you would do to help the child cope with it. What words would you use? What actions would you take? Write your response in the space below.

Social and Moral Development from Four to Six

Stages of Moral Development

Children are not born with a sense of right and wrong. However, infants do learn that some behaviors are approved of while others are not. Gradually, children develop a *conscience*, an inner sense of right and wrong, that prompts good behavior or causes feelings of guilt for wrong behavior. Learning to base behavior on what is believed to be right or wrong is called *moral development*. Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg were pioneers in identifying stages of moral development.

JEAN PIAGET

Piaget, the same Swiss psychologist whose theory of intellectual development was discussed in Chapter 9, asked children of different ages to make moral judgments about a number of situations. He concluded that their moral development was related to their intellectual development. Children do not have their own moral codes until they are able to think rationally. Piaget proposed two main stages of moral development.

- **Stage 1: The morality of constraint.** In this stage, children accept the moral rules of adults without question. Children believe that misbehavior will always be punished. In general, whatever the offense, they think that strong punishment is good, and that acts are judged on the basis of their consequences, not their intent.

- **Stage 2: The morality of cooperation.** At about age nine, children enter the second stage. This stage involves a more mature moral code of cooperation, exchange of favors, and mutual respect. Rules are regarded as being based on mutual give-and-take and can be altered. Children now can consider the intent behind the act. They see that punishment should fit the "crime,"

and that the wrongdoer should put things right, rather than simply be punished.

LAWRENCE KOHLBERG

More recently, psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg extended Piaget's theory. He identified six stages of moral development, organized into three levels. He believed that people go through these stages in order. Only when each stage is mastered, can people move to the next stage or level.

- **Level I: Preconventional morality.** At this level, there is no real standard of morality. Instead, children do what others tell them. They evaluate behavior in terms of the reward or punishment it will bring. In Stage 1, children obey the rules set by others to avoid punishment. In Stage 2, they begin to obey rules for the rewards they may gain. They learn that when they do something for others, they often get something in return.

- **Level II: Conventional morality.** The development of conventional morality begins at about age eight. Most children have reached this level by age thirteen. At this level of development, people conform to existing social rules. Behavior is based on whether it is approved or disapproved by others, especially those in authority. In Stage 3, children want to be considered good by others. They understand what a "good" person is. The main concern of Stage 4 is law and order. People show respect for authority and have a sense of doing their duty. According to Kohlberg, most adults operate at this level.

- **Level III: Postconventional morality.** By the end of the teen years or later, some people move to the level of postconventional morality.

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According to Kohlberg, not everyone reaches this highest level. At Stage 5, people rationally choose to uphold the values of society. Morality is based on mutual rights and universal principles, such as justice, the equality of human rights, and fair play. In Stage 6, people choose their own ethical principles apart from the standards of other groups or people.

Taking Action

Describe a specific situation that involves moral choices. Using Piaget's and Kohlberg's theories, describe how a child or an adult would act in that situation at each of the stages they identified. Then consider whether you think one theory gives more insight into understanding moral development that the other. Be prepared to tell which one, and why.

Situation: _____

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Piaget's Stage 1: _____

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Piaget's Stage 2: _____

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Kohlberg's Level I: _____

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Kohlberg's Level II: _____

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Kohlberg's Level III: _____

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Social and Moral Development from Four to Six

Aggressive Behavior in Children

Every child sometimes behaves in ways that are unacceptable. However, some children get a reputation for being aggressive, or being "troublemakers." What is considered aggressive behavior? When is it a problem, and how can it be helped?

Aggression is behavior that causes physical or emotional harm, or destroys things. Aggressive-type behavior is common at certain ages. For example, toddlers sometimes react to their inability to do or get what they want with temper tantrums. They do not know other ways to deal with their frustrations. However, by age four to six, children should be learning to control how they express their feelings and do so in more acceptable ways.

Aggressive behavior can be physical or verbal. It can take various forms, including hitting, kicking, biting, pinching, grabbing, and teasing. To understand and deal with such behavior, it helps to understand the four basic types: accidental, expressive, instrumental, and hostile.

ACCIDENTAL AGGRESSION

In *accidental aggression*, a child hurts someone unintentionally. For example, the child might step on another child's foot or knock over another child's blocks while walking by.

Explain to the child who was hurt that this was an accident. Help the aggressor understand that the other child was hurt. Have the child who caused the problem apologize. Discuss how to avoid similar incidents.

EXPRESSIVE AGGRESSION

Expressive aggression occurs when a child commits an act of aggression simply because it feels good. The act is deliberate, but the child does not intend to hurt anyone. For example, a child may knock down someone's stack of blocks on purpose but not notice the builder's disappointment or anger.

It is important to remind the aggressive child how his or her actions affected the other person. Help the child find ways to play and express feelings, without harming or upsetting others.

INSTRUMENTAL AGGRESSION

Instrumental aggression occurs when children compete for toys, attention, or taking turns, and someone gets hurt as a result. For example, two children both think they should be first in line. In an effort to be first, they shove and push.

Most aggressive behavior committed by preschoolers is instrumental, and it often results from fights over toys or other objects. Let children know that this is an unacceptable way to get what they want. Provide opportunities to learn the importance of sharing and taking turns. Reduce conflicts by eliminating the need to compete for materials or attention.

HOSTILE AGGRESSION

When a child commits an aggressive act intentionally in order to hurt another child, it is called *hostile aggression*. This is also known as bullying. Children who use hostile aggression enjoy hurting others. Acts of aggression may make them feel more powerful.

Make it clear that hostile aggression will not be allowed, and follow through immediately if it occurs. Children who frequently display hostile aggression may need professional counseling.

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DEALING WITH AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR

Take a dual approach in dealing with aggressive behavior. First, use techniques to minimize it. Second, plan how to react when it does occur. These suggestions can help:

- **Set a good example.** Show appropriate ways to deal with anger and disappointment. Remain calm when you are upset, or when you are around children who are upset.

- **Teach empathy.** Children this age can begin to learn to consider others' feelings. They may need to be coached on reading how others signal their feelings.

- **Try to understand causes.** If aggressive behavior is a frequent problem, keep a record of each incident, including when, where, what happened, and clues to why. Analyze the record to try to identify triggers.

- **Teach ways to handle conflict and solve problems.** Teach children to resolve conflicts by talking about their feelings and coming up with solutions. Help them practice finding solutions that allow both people to "win."

- **Set clear expectations and consequences.** Aggressive behavior is unacceptable. Explain and follow through on consequences.

- **Do not ignore it.** Never ignore or give in to aggressive behavior. Address it immediately. Avoid a power struggle with the aggressor.

- **Do not use physical activity as punishment.** Physical activity can be an outlet for children to release anger and frustration, but it is not a substitute for learning to handle feelings. It is inappropriate to punish an aggressor with physical activity.

- **Praise children.** Reward appropriate behavior and steps toward improvement with praise.

All children need to know that they are loved. Tell children who are acting aggressively that you do not approve of their behavior, but that you do care about them. Give them opportunities to act appropriately and responsibilities that make them feel good about themselves. Respond immediately and positively when you notice good behavior. If the problem worsens or shows no improvement over time, seek outside help. Children whose inappropriate behavior is not addressed may have lifelong problems with aggression.

Taking Action

Imagine that you are a teacher in an early childhood classroom. One of your four-year-old students is behaving aggressively. Explain how you would determine the reason for the aggression. Describe the steps you would take to deal with the aggressive behavior.